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REVIEWS

Janet Sobel

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Janet Sobel probably never read Clement Greenberg's glancing tribute to her in his revised 1955 essay "'American-Type' Painting," but the passage has become an obligatory pit stop in discussions of her puzzling, newly resuscitated career. Back in 1944 at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery, Greenberg recalls, "Pollock (and I myself) admired [Sobel's] pictures rather furtively. . . . The effect, and it was the first really 'all-over' one that I had ever seen . . .was strangely pleasing." You'd think the implication that Sobel had some role in Pollock's development would have guaranteed her a steady measure of attention. Instead, the hedged tone (and perhaps also the description of Sobel as a "housewife living in Brooklyn") may have had the opposite effect. Sobel didn't show again during her lifetime. A few scholars have written about her pioneering drip abstractions (beginning with William Rubin in these pages in 1967), and a few canvases have appeared in revisionist surveys, but this was the first exhibition devoted to Sobel since her second show at Art of This Century fifty-six years ago.

Sobel's long eclipse, like her brief fame, was partly a matter of circumstance. Born in Ukraine. she moved to the United States as a teenager, married, had five kids, and in 1937, already in her forties, impulsively took up painting. As her style grew increasingly nonobjective, Sobel earned a bemused local notoriety: CRITICS ACCLAIM BORO GRANDMOTHER AS TOP FLIGHT SURREALIST PAINTER read one Brooklyn headline in 1945. Clippings show a small, genial, heavyset woman, the archetypal nana: When Max Emst and André Breton showed up at her house in Brighton Beach, you don't need to be told that she served them gefilte fish and chicken soup.

Soon after her second solo show, illness and allergies forced Sobel to give up oil paints—and the drip-based style that had intrigued Pollock. She continued to make images until her death in 1968, apparently without any effort to exhibit them. The result is a curious legacy: a vast hoard of pictures, mostly undated, with little information on their author's subjects or motives.

Understandably, the gallery has chosen to focus on the period from 1941 to 1948, bracketing Sobel's foray into pure abstraction. The sequence opens with enigmatic watercolors of wartime subjects, then follows Sobel's move toward ever more hallucinogenic patterning. The later pictures show fractured rainbows interspersed with swollen smiling faces. The impression is of a dramatic, coherent trajectory: from representational angst to dissolution and finally a goofy, prismatic calm.

But the chronology is for the most part provisional, and many questions remain. Sobel's ardent and uncannily timely experimentation (she used sand and enamel as well as oils and adapted glass pipettes from her husband's costume-jewelry business for dripping and blowing paint) is hard to imagine without some kind of corroborating factor. It is possible that she had seen Pollock's own experimental partial-drip paintings, shown at Guggenheim's gallery in 1943—in which case Pollock's “furtive” admiration would have been ironic. an appreciation of his own influence. (Sobel's family, however, insists that her contacts with the art world were minimal, that we should take at her word her claim to be entirely self-invented.)

The trickier question is the intrinsic merit of the works themselves, which varies wildly even within individual pictures. Often folk-art mannerisms butt up against passages of idiosyncratic fierceness. Faces, comic but stiffly marionettish, are a constant liability. But the turn toward abstraction clearly energized Sobel. A few transitional images—especially a vertiginous painting of heaped figures rising into a frothy sky—seem radically unsettled, freakish and powerful. The pure abstractions vary too, from handsome but bland traceries to viscous dotted tangles that eerily anticipate you-know-who. Is it possible to appreciate Sobel in her own right, entirely apart from Pollock? Not yet, and certainly not until we get a better sense of their (mutual) indebtedness. But at the least, Sobel's work offers a reminder that something very much like Pollock's recklessness could well up out of a far less melodramatic biography.

—Alexi Worth